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# Preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships

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## Abstract

The present study examined ethnically Dutch preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships. The description of an asylum seeker was compared with that of a Moroccan and a Dutch peer. The findings suggest that asylum seekers were described more negatively than peers from the other two groups. Additionally, we examined the willingness and reasons for wanting or not wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer. It was found that asylum seekers were more often rejected than Moroccans. The negative description and rejection of asylum seekers were strongest among participants living close to a center for asylum seekers. The reasoning about friendship acceptance or rejection was examined in terms of individual reasons as well as peer group interactions. It is shown that fact construction or empirical 'grounding' plays an important role in early adolescents' reasoning about friendship exclusion.

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**Keywords:** Preadolescents; Asylum seekers; Friendship; Acceptance; Rejection; Intergroup contact; Peer exclusion; Outgroup membership

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to examine preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships, and to explore possible situational differences related to visible contacts with asylum seekers. Almost nothing is known about children's understanding of asylum

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seekers and little is known about how children reason about possible friendships based on group membership.

As a theoretical framework, we used social representation theory, developed in European social psychology (Moscovici, 1984). Concepts such as ‘situated cognition’, ‘socially shared knowledge’, and ‘social representation’ have been proposed as alternatives or additions to Piaget’s constructive work on intellectual development (see Emler & Ohana, 1993; Resnick, Levine & Teasley, 1991). In these approaches, cognition is seen as embedded in historical, cultural and sociorelational contexts. Cognitions are not purely individual constructions but are greatly influenced by the kinds of beliefs in the child’s environment. The construction of meaning is seen as a social process, and meanings as social products. Common understandings are being created and recreated through interaction and communication between individuals and groups.

Social representation theory is more like a heuristic framework than a system of interrelated propositions with clear hypotheses that can be tested empirically. Empirical investigations have used social representation theory for studying the development of knowledge (e.g., Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Emler, Ohana & Moscovici, 1987; Lloyd, 1987; Verkuyten, Kinket & van der Wielen, 1997). The theory focuses on everyday understandings and the content of knowledge. This is in accordance with our goal of investigating early adolescents’ understanding of asylum seeker peers rather than cognitive processes. Additionally, we focused on the reasoning of the participants, by investigating the content of their explanations for wanting or not wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker peer. These explanations shed light on the socially accepted principles used to explain behavior and, hence, on the commonplaces that function as justifications. Furthermore, because social representation theory emphasizes the importance of interaction for creating understandings, we discuss two examples of our focus-group study on the ways that preadolescents discuss contacts with asylum seeker peers.

The study was conducted in the Netherlands and is part of a research project on ethnic, racial and cultural group relations among preadolescents from the Dutch majority group and various categories of minorities (see Verkuyten, 2004a, 2005a, for reviews). The focus of the present study was on ethnically Dutch preadolescents’ descriptions of a ‘typical’ asylum seeker peer and their reasoning for wanting or not wanting to be friends with such a peer. For comparison purposes, the participants were also asked to describe a ‘typical’ Moroccan and Dutch peer. Additionally, they were asked to indicate whether and why they wanted to be friends with a Moroccan peer. Together with Turks, Moroccans are the ‘established’ ethnic minority group that is the least accepted in the Netherlands (Hagendoorn, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). Furthermore, the descriptions and reasoning of preadolescents living close to an asylum seeker center were compared with those of participants having no direct contacts with asylum seekers.

In the following sections, we first elaborate on the category of asylum seekers and the role of intergroup contact. Subsequently, children’s reasoning about group-based exclusion and friendships is discussed.

### *1.1. Understanding asylum seekers*

While there are many studies that have examined the development of ethnic and racial group stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination (see Aboud & Amato, 2001, for a review), these studies have been predominantly concerned with children’s views and attitudes towards ‘established’ minority groups that, racially or culturally, are considered relatively homogeneous and that have a long established

presence in the country in which they live. For example, most studies in North America have examined children's attitudes towards African-Americans, and studies in other countries have looked at perceptions or behaviors towards ethnic minority groups, such as Pakistanis and Indians in Great Britain (e.g., Davey, 1983; Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000), Aborigines and Asians in Australia (e.g., Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996), and Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands (e.g., Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002).

What is not known, however, is how preadolescents understand and evaluate asylum seeker peers. This seems a gap worth filling, given the continuing flow of large numbers of displaced persons from developing nations seeking economic, social and political refuge in first world countries, including the Netherlands. Someone who arrives in these countries seeking asylum is legitimately and legally defined as an 'asylum seeker'. Once their claim has been assessed they are then defined either as a refugee or their status in the country is illegal. In the Netherlands the assessment procedure can take up to 2 or 3 years and during that period people live at a center for asylum seekers. These centers are spread across the country and many of them are near small towns in the less densely populated areas.

In 2000, over 43,000 people applied for asylum in the Netherlands, and in 2001 the number was more than 32,000. These people came from various countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan and the former republic of Yugoslavia. Hence, the category of asylum seekers is a very heterogeneous one in terms of origin, history, physical characteristics, culture, and language. Despite this heterogeneity, the term 'asylum seeker' is commonly and widely used. The topic of asylum seekers, for example, plays a major role in political and public debates in the Netherlands as well as in many other Western European countries (see Lynn & Lea, 2003; Muus, 1997). In the Netherlands, this topic was one of the main issues in the political campaigns of the recent local and general elections of 2002 and 2003. Furthermore, the category of asylum seekers features in people's everyday thinking and raises emotional reactions (Verkuyten, 2004b). Hence, despite the ethnic, racial and cultural heterogeneity, the category of asylum seekers is socially very meaningful and little is known about how children understand this category, and asylum seeker peers in particular.

### *1.2. Intergroup contact*

In the Netherlands, asylum seekers face several restrictions related to work and welfare provisions, but they are allowed to venture outside asylum seeker centers, for example, to visit the town or go shopping, and for children to go to school. Although there are very few close social relationships, this means that asylum seekers are visible for the local residents and that people can have experiences with, and/or of, them. The situation for Dutch people not living near an asylum seekers' center is different. Most never see or actually meet asylum seekers. They have no direct, visible contacts with them, and their main sources of information about asylum seekers are the media and public debates.

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis proposes that contacts with out-group members can improve out-group perceptions and evaluations. Such a positive effect is not self-evident, however, but depends on many conditions and factors (see Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 1998), such as the nature of the contact, existing social support, and cooperative interdependence. Research on the contact hypothesis has focused typically on the social conditions for positive contact to reduce stereotyping and prejudice. Empirically, the influence of negative contact is largely ignored. Some studies have examined the role of children's own negative experiences in understanding ethnic attitudes (e.g., Verkuyten, 2002), but in general little is known about negative contact.

In our study we asked two groups of preadolescents to describe an asylum seeker peer and to explain their willingness for friendship. One group of participants lived near an asylum seeker center – the direct contact situation – whereas the other group lived in a town where there was no such center – the no-contact situation. One reason for conducting this study was that concerns had been expressed about widespread negative ideas, beliefs and reactions towards asylum seekers in the vicinity of this particular contact situation. There had been some incidents and conflicts between local residents and asylum seekers. Some residents were worried that the socially shared negative beliefs and understandings might affect children's attitudes.

It does not seem unreasonable to expect that the difference in contact in the two situations has implications for preadolescents' understanding of asylum seeker peers and their evaluation of possible friendships. Social representation theory argues that substantial differences in knowledge, beliefs and intentions can be expected when children live in situations that constitute distinctive social environments. Children in these environments will differ in the social beliefs and experiences that are used to define and understand each others' behavior. Children without direct contacts have to base their ideas and attitudes on information about asylum seeker centers and refugees that they get from parents, teachers or the media. In contrast, children with contacts can (in part) base their ideas and attitudes on what they themselves and others see and experience. The differences between the two situations lead to the expectation that the preadolescents in the contact situation, compared to the no-contact situation, will have a more concrete understanding of asylum seekers as well as a more negative attitude. In other words, the descriptions in the contact situation can be expected to focus more on visible characteristics such as skin color and clothing. In addition, it can be expected that these descriptions will be more negative and that preadolescents in this particular contact situation will be more likely to reject asylum seekers as friends than children in the no-contact situation. Furthermore, the reasons for friendship, acceptance or rejection might differ between the two situations.

### *1.3. Reasoning about friendships*

Peer exclusion and rejection is a well-studied topic. However, it is mainly examined in terms of exclusion based on individual social deficits rather than on group membership (see Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hawker & Boulton, 2000, for reviews). In addition, the focus tends to be on social skills, behavioral aspects and psychological consequences, and not so much on children's explanations and accounts of peer exclusion and inclusion.

There is, however, an increasing interest in how children reason about exclusion when this is based on group membership (e.g., Brown & Bigler, 2004; Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim & Ardila-Rey, 2001; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Phinney & Cobb, 1996; Theimer, Killen & Stangor, 2001; Verkuyten et al., 1997). Although peer exclusion is often considered wrong and unjustified it can also be considered acceptable and legitimate. For example, exclusion may be viewed as legitimate in order to preserve the functioning of a social group (Killen & Stangor, 2001). The exclusion of ethnic peers from play activities can be justified by arguing that every child is free to choose with whom he or she wants to play, and therefore has a right to choose his or her playmates (Verkuyten et al., 1997). Thus, children can use different forms of reasoning to condemn or justify peer exclusion. Interpretations and evaluations of exclusion are both content and context dependent (e.g., Brown & Bigler, 2004; Killen, Stangor, Price, Horn & Sechrist, 2004). For example, exclusion from peer group activities might be interpreted differently than the

rejection of others as potential friends, just as the character or perception of the exclusion of ethnic in-group members might differ from that of out-group members.

The present study focused on preadolescents' reasoning about a potential friendship with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer. The participants were asked to indicate whether they would like to be friends with peers such as these and to explain the reasoning behind their answer. Hence, our focus was on judgments about intimate relationships and we examined to what extent out-group membership plays a role in preadolescents' evaluations and explanations. Friendship is of crucial importance for children's development (see [Dunn, 2004](#)), and [Pettigrew \(1998\)](#) has argued and demonstrated that intergroup friendships are pivotal for the reduction of negative out-group perceptions. However, the willingness to accept out-group members as friends is, in general, much lower than the willingness to accept them as, for example, classmates or neighbors (see [Hagendoorn, 1995](#)).

Research has shown that friendships are typically considered a matter of personal decision (see [Nucci, 2001](#)). However, friendship choices based on ethnicity or race are often also moral issues ([Killen, Stangor, Price, Horn, & Sechrist, 2004](#)). Preadolescents are well aware that such choices can be criticized, making them reluctant, for example, to indicate that they do not like peers because they are asylum seekers or Moroccans. When challenged in such situations, children try to find acceptable explanations to account for their group-based friendship choices.

Social cognitive domain theory and research (see [Killen, Margie & Sinno, 2004](#); [Smetena, 1995](#); [Turiel, 2002](#)) has argued and demonstrated that children use moral and social-conventional knowledge for reasoning about inclusion and exclusion. Issues of fairness, equality and emotional responsiveness are used as well as group norms, expectations and stereotypes about others. Additionally, children can refer to reasons that affect the self or are in the interest of the self, such as the number of friends. We expected that these different forms of reasoning would also be used in explaining and justifying why one does or does not want to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer. Furthermore, we explored whether there was a difference in reasoning for the two target groups. For example, it was thought likely that moral reactions, such as emotional responsiveness and empathy, would be used more when explaining friendships with asylum seekers, due to their history of needing to seek refuge, than would be the case when explanations were given for friendship choices concerning Moroccans. In contrast, references to cultural identity and group stereotypes were considered more likely to be given as explanations for friendships with the more homogeneous Moroccan group.

Social-conventional beliefs entail several forms of reasoning, including those that concern group identity and group stereotypes. These beliefs are typically accepted by agreement and can also be disputed and changed ([Turiel, 2002](#)). Group characterizations can be seen as either more or less accurate or inaccurate reflections of the nature of groups. An explanation for exclusion is more convincing when it is seen as based on real rather than on stereotypical group differences. This means that the rejection of out-group members as potential friends can be made reasonable and acceptable by constructing stereotypical descriptions as factual or empirically grounded: for example, when children from a particular group are considered as being quarrelsome or when out-group friendships are rejected because of existing cultural, religious and language differences. Hence, and following social representation theory, it seems important to not only examine the relative and contextual use of particular social-conventional beliefs but also to focus on the ways that social reality is understood and collectively and interactively defined. These are issues that we have discussed more fully elsewhere ([Verkuyten, 2005b](#)). Here we present two empirical examples.



## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In total, 80 ethnically Dutch preadolescents participated in this study: 37 were girls and 43 were boys. The participants were between 10 and 12 years of age ( $M=10.88$ ,  $SD=.68$ ) and were drawn from three primary schools located in two numerically similar, small cities (around 30,000 residents). One school ( $N=26$ ) was located in a city in which there is no asylum seekers' center, nor is there one in the city's immediate area. However, 6% of the school population has an ethnically non-Dutch background, of which most are either from a Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese background. The two other schools ( $n=32$ , and  $n=22$ ) were from a city in which there is an asylum seekers' center and both schools were located close to this center. In total, 3% of the school population studied here are from a non-ethnically Dutch background, of which a few are the children of asylum seekers. When comparing the first school with the second two, as described above, we use the term 'no-contact (with asylum seekers) situation' for the first school and 'contact (with asylum seekers) situation' for the latter two.

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

Preadolescents anonymously completed a two-part questionnaire. Part 1 consisted of a single page on which the participants were asked to describe three typical peers. The introduction stated, 'Below you can describe a, according to you, typical Moroccan, typical Dutch and typical asylum seeker of your own age'. Beneath this the name of each group was listed next to a space with ruled lines for the description. The list was such that the participants were presented first with a Moroccan, then a Dutch and then an asylum seeker peer. Because in the introduction a comparative context explicitly was made salient, the order of presentation of groups was not counterbalanced. The open-ended answers were analyzed for two characteristics: (a) the content of the description, and (b) the evaluative nature of the description.

The participants used a variety of descriptions, illustrating the richness of the vocabulary available for describing ethnic peers. To create a manageable data set suitable for content analysis, the various descriptions were categorized by characteristics selected as defining. In order to do this, the descriptions were read and re-read until a complete inventory was made of the descriptions given. We then analyzed the inventory for similar phrases, words, or meanings that referred to or were used to describe each of the three 'typical' peers the participants had been asked to describe. The next step was to reduce the different descriptions into a manageable set for the coding process. Eventually, we distinguished four different categories. The first one was physical features, such as skin color and foreignness; the second was cultural features, such as language, religion and clothing; the third was stereotypical attributes that referred to personal characteristics and abilities, such as being nice, quarrelsome, honest, and slow; and the fourth included descriptions that made references to living conditions, such as being poor and living at an asylum seeker center.

For the evaluative nature of the descriptions a distinction between negative (1), neutral (2) and positive (3) was made. Each description was scored using this three-point scale. A total score was computed for each participant by summing the scores for the evaluations, divided by the number of descriptions.

In Part 2, the participants were presented with the following questions on a single page: 'Would you like to be friends with a Moroccan or an asylum seeker of your own age and *why*?' The participants were

asked to answer this question for a Moroccan peer first and then for an asylum seeker peer. The open-ended responses were analyzed in terms of the willingness for friendship and the explanations given. All participants answered affirmatively ('Yes'), negatively ('No') or conditionally ('perhaps', 'it depends') on the question about friendship. Conditional answers are those in which the children argued that one would like to be friends but that this is reliant on certain characteristics and circumstances. Hence, for the willingness for friendship the coding of 'yes', 'no' and 'perhaps' was used.

The explanations were analyzed for the reasons given for friendship. The analyses were performed separately for a Moroccan and an asylum seeker peer, as well as for the participants who answered affirmatively and for those who answered negatively or conditionally on the question whether one would like to be friends. The explanations were read and re-read until a complete inventory was made of the reasons and principles used. To reduce the different reasons into a manageable set we used frequencies whereby a principle was retained if more than 10% of the participants referred to it.

There were three coding categories for the negative answers:

- 1) *Negative out-group stereotypes* (e.g., 'no, not at all! Because they steal things and fight with everybody, they are very aggressive, and stupid and not nice at all'; 'no, not at all, because they are crazy and often aggressive and wild and arrogant').
- 2) *Cultural characteristics* that would make friendships very difficult (e.g., 'no, because if you have a friend you must be able to talk to her'; 'with friends you like to play, but they are not always allowed to play').
- 3) *Unfamiliarity* and the participants' *own attitudes* (e.g., 'no, I don't know them and I don't know how to do that'; 'I don't like foreigners').

In addition, two categories were used to differentiate between the conditional explanations.

- 4) *Personal qualities* of the asylum seeker or Moroccan peer: participants explained that they wanted to be friends as long as the other was, for example, nice and friendly ('It depends, only when they play nice'; 'Some asylum seekers always look for trouble and I don't want to be friends with them, but others are nice and then I like to be friends with them').
- 5) *Practical circumstances*: whether the potential friend lives close by and speaks sufficient Dutch. (e.g., 'It depends whether they live close by or not').

Three categories were distinguished for the affirmative answers.

- 6) *Positive out-group stereotypes* of an asylum seeker or Moroccan peer ('yes, they are nice and they talk funny').
- 7) *Moral reasons* for wanting to be friends: reasons that involved explanations that referred to an empathy with or an emotional responsiveness to the situation of these peers or to issues of equality and similarity ('asylum seekers need help and therefore I would like to be friends with them'; 'it is not fair when you do not want to play with someone because of her origin').
- 8) *Self-interest*: the possibility to learn from another culture and religion, and the usefulness of such friendships ('Yes, then you can learn from them, that's nice'; 'that is handy for when I have to write a paper about their country'; 'Yes, because I have more friends then').

### 2.3. Inter-coding reliability

The coding schemes were developed for the different sections, and then open-ended responses were coded by the second author. Subsequently, a research assistant independently coded a random selection



of one-third of the questionnaires. Cohen's kappa coefficients for the different coding schemes were  $>.95$ .

#### 2.4. *Focus-group discussions*

After the participants within a particular class had filled in the questionnaire a number of volunteer classmates were invited to talk further about their answers and to participate in a focus-group discussion (e.g., Krueger, 1989; Morgan, 1988). There were four mixed-gender groups of a total of twenty-one participants. The discussions were held with groups of four or six children in a classroom at school. Each session lasted approximately 30 min. The discussions were structured as little as possible and a moderator was present. Her prime task was to introduce and initiate the discussion and to raise some general issues (e.g., 'What do you know about Asylum seekers?', 'What do other people think about asylum seekers?'). Sometimes clarifications were requested, but we tried to limit our interventions so that the children could respond and react towards each other as much as possible. With these discussions, we wanted to create a situation in which the children were likely to argue among themselves, so that we would be able to record longer discussions systematically. All sessions were taped and transcribed. The transcript made foregrounds the semantic content and the broad structural characteristics of the talk. In the transcript, children's emphases were underlined.

We used a discursive analytical approach for analyzing the discussions (see Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards & Stokoe, 2004; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). This discursive analysis is not about coding and counting responses, but about examining the ways in which definitions and interpretations are accomplished in interactive social practices (Potter, 1998). In other words, the analytical interest is in identifying discursive devices and practices, and the ways that these are used, in our case, defining or challenging friendship choices and peer relations. These devices and resources may or may not be invoked to define particular realities per se. However, the question of individual differences, intentions and reasons for the language used is beyond the scope of discursive analyses. The focus is on the discursive practices within which the moral issues involved in peer rejection are constructed and managed. For the present purpose, we use only two extracts from the discussions to illustrate how early adolescents construct empirical claims in justifying or criticizing the rejection of asylum seeker peers.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Describing 'typical' peers*

Table 1 shows the results of the early adolescents' descriptions of a typical Moroccan, a typical Dutch and a typical asylum seeker peer. The kind of characteristics used to describe a Moroccan and a Dutch child were quite similar. In their descriptions, the early adolescents used physical features such as skin color; cultural characteristics such as language (e.g., Moroccan language) and clothing (e.g., headscarf); and stereotypical attributes such as typical behaviors and personality traits. References to living conditions were made less frequently. There was no significant difference in the description of a typical peer of either group in any of the four categories ( $ps > .10$ ).

However, when describing an asylum seeker peer, participants placed more emphasis on living conditions than on the other three categories. Almost half of the participants made reference to living in

Table 1

Percentages of participants ( $N = 80$ ) that used each descriptive category at least once in the 'typical peer' descriptions

| Descriptive category     | Type of peer  |          |       |
|--------------------------|---------------|----------|-------|
|                          | Asylum seeker | Moroccan | Dutch |
| Physical features        | 28.8%         | 48.8%    | 50.0% |
| Cultural features        | 26.7%         | 55.1%    | 43.8% |
| Stereotypical attributes | 33.8%         | 51.3%    | 47.5% |
| Living conditions        | 47.1%         | 11.4%    | 16.3% |
| Other                    | 26.6%         | 23.8%    | 18.8% |

an asylum seeker center, not having a residence permit and being poor. Descriptions using physical and cultural features were less common, as were stereotypical attributes for describing an asylum seeker peer than when describing a Moroccan or a Dutch peer ( $ps < .05$ ).

Comparing the descriptions of the participants from the two situations ('contact' and 'no-contact' with asylum seekers), no significant differences were found in the use of the four categories when describing a typical Moroccan or Dutch child ( $ps > .10$ ). However, there was a significant difference when describing an asylum seeker,  $\chi^2(3, N=80)=9.43$ ,  $p < .01$ . The participants living near an asylum seekers' center made more references to physical features than those who did not live near a center (38.9% versus 7.7%), and they made fewer references to living conditions (29.3% versus 63.8%).

### 3.2. Evaluative nature of peer descriptions

On the basis of a 3-point scale ranging from negative to neutral to positive, the descriptions of a typical Dutch peer were the most positive ( $M=2.19$ ,  $SD=.42$ ), followed by those for a Moroccan peer ( $M=1.80$ ,  $SD=.41$ ); whereas those for the asylum seeker peer were the most negative ( $M=1.66$ ,  $SD=.43$ ). The score for the typical Dutch peer differed significantly from the neutral mid-point of the scale,  $t(79)=4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . The descriptions of the typical Moroccan and the typical asylum seeker peer were significantly more negative than the mid-point,  $t(79)=4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $t(79)=6.96$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Repeated measurement analysis of variance showed that the descriptions of the three groups differed significantly,  $F(2, 79)=34.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Pair-wise tests indicated that the descriptions of all three target groups were significantly different from each other ( $ps < .01$ ). Hence, the early adolescents tended to describe a typical Dutch child positively, whereas a typical Moroccan child was described more negatively and an asylum seekers child was described even more negatively. It should be noted, however, that these scores have to be understood in relation to the content of the descriptions. In particular, the low score for the asylum seeker peer is a reflection of their negative living conditions, as these were most often referred to in the description.

There was a positive association between the evaluative nature of the descriptions of the typical Moroccan and the typical asylum seeker ( $r=.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, neither of these descriptions was significantly related to the description of the typical Dutch child. This suggests that the evaluation of the in-group was independent of the evaluation of the two out-groups, whereas the out-group evaluations were moderately associated. Early adolescents tended to describe Moroccans and asylum seekers in a similar way, but the modest correlation suggests that there are relevant differences between the two out-groups.

The evaluative nature of the descriptions of the typical Moroccan and the typical Dutch peer did not differ significantly between the two types of situation ( $ps > .10$ ). However, as expected, the prototypical

asylum seeker was described more negatively in the contact situation than in the no-contact situation,  $t(79)=2.34, p<.05$ .

### 3.3. Friendships

The early adolescents were asked whether or not they would like to be friends with a Moroccan and with an asylum seeker peer, and to explain their answer. Table 2 shows the percentages of participants for each type of answer ('yes', 'perhaps', and 'no') for the total sample and for each of these two target peer groups.

Looking first at the total sample, we see that more than half of the early adolescents indicated that they did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker. Around a third did want to be friends with a peer from this group. The results for the Moroccans as the target group were quite similar and there is no significant difference in the percentages for either group,  $\chi^2(2, N=80)=1.54, p>.10$ . Additionally, there was a strong positive association between responses to the questions about these two peer groups ( $r=.61, p<.05$ ). In total, 76.2% of those that did not want to be friends with a Moroccan peer also did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker, and 72% that did want to be friends with a peer from the one group also wanted to be friends with a peer from the other group.

The data in Table 2 reveal situational differences in peer acceptance of asylum seekers and Moroccans. As expected, for the asylum seekers the acceptance was significantly lower in the contact situation than in the no-contact situation,  $\chi^2(2, N=80)=24.5, p<.01$ . In the former situation almost three-fourths of the early adolescents indicated that they did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker and one-fourth said that they did want to be friends. In this situation, participants seem to be either for or against such a friendship because very few children ( $N=3$ ) indicated that they would 'perhaps want' to be friends. In the no-contact situation, the rejection of asylum seeker peers was relatively low and the majority indicated that they did want to be friends with an asylum seeker or that they would accept them conditionally.

Moroccan peers were also significantly less accepted in the contact situation than in the no-contact one,  $\chi^2(2, N=80)=16.5, p<.01$ . Almost 60% of the early adolescents from the contact situation rejected Moroccan peers, whereas the percentage was 11.5% for the no-contact situation. In the contact situation,

Table 2

Percentages of participants ( $N=80$ ) indicating levels of friendship acceptance/rejection for the two target groups and the two level of contact situations

| Target group and contact situation | Friendship |         |       |
|------------------------------------|------------|---------|-------|
|                                    | Yes        | Perhaps | No    |
| <i>Asylum seeker peer</i>          |            |         |       |
| Total sample                       | 31.1%      | 16.3%   | 52.5% |
| Contact situation                  | 24.1%      | 5.6%    | 70.4% |
| No-contact situation               | 46.2%      | 38.5%   | 15.4% |
| <i>Moroccan peer</i>               |            |         |       |
| Total sample                       | 36.3%      | 20.0%   | 43.8% |
| Contact situation                  | 27.8%      | 13.0%   | 59.3% |
| No-contact situation               | 53.8%      | 34.6%   | 11.5% |

the rejection of the Moroccans was somewhat less than that of the asylum seekers, and in the no-contact situation, peers from both groups were accepted equally.

### 3.4. Reasons for peer rejection

The early adolescents who explicitly indicated that they did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker or a Moroccan peer gave three main reasons for this: negative out-group stereotypes, cultural characteristics, and unfamiliarity/own attitudes. Table 3 shows that more than half of the early adolescents who rejected asylum seekers, explained that they did so because these peers were aggressive, arrogant, quarrelsome, mean, dishonest, dirty, stupid, or not nice. Almost a third of these participants rejected a Moroccan peer for these reasons as well. Importantly, most of these participants did not argue that these peers might have these negative characteristics or that they perceived them like this, but rather emphasized the factual or empirical nature of these qualities (see below). In doing so, an acceptable explanation and justification for the peer rejection was given.

The second main reason for not wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker or a Moroccan peer was related to characteristics that would make close relationships difficult or impossible. In addition to practical difficulties (e.g., living in an asylum seekers' center, and the possibility that they will have to leave the neighborhood soon), the majority of participants argued that speaking a different language and having another culture or religion would make friendships too difficult. This explanation was given more frequently for the rejection of Moroccan peers than for asylum seekers. This is probably because the 'cultural knowledge' about the former, Islamic and more homogeneous group is greater than for the latter group. Language and cultural differences would make intimate relationships too difficult and thereby provide understandable arguments for friendship rejection. Additionally, participants typically claimed that friendship choices were based on personal characteristics, and culture was presented as

Table 3

Percentages of participants using each category of explanation for each type of friendship response (total numbers in brackets) for asylum seeker and Moroccan peers

|                                | Asylum seeker peer | Moroccan peer |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| <i>No Friendship</i>           |                    |               |
| Negative out-group stereotypes | 57.1% (24)         | 31.6% (13)    |
| Cultural characteristics       | 33.3% (14)         | 62.8% (22)    |
| Unfamiliarity/own attitudes    | 10.5% (5)          | 17.1% (6)     |
| Miscellaneous                  | 14.3% (6)          | 11.4% (4)     |
| <i>Conditional Friendship</i>  |                    |               |
| Personal qualities             | 61.5% (8)          | 75.0% (12)    |
| Practical circumstances        | 53.1% (7)          | 38.5% (8)     |
| <i>Yes Friendship</i>          |                    |               |
| Positive out-group stereotypes | 48.1% (12)         | 58.6% (17)    |
| Moral reasons                  | 40.0% (10)         | 34.5% (10)    |
| Self-interest                  | 16.1% (4)          | 26.6% (8)     |
| Miscellaneous                  | 12.5% (3)          | 13.4% (4)     |

*Note.* Participants could refer to more than one type of explanation and therefore the total percentage for each friendship response can exceed 100%.

shaping personality ('No, they are not like me, they do not think like me because they have a different culture'; 'No, because they are different, strange, and you do not know how they are, how they think'). By presenting culture as shaping personality, a cultural account makes friendship rejection understandable and acceptable. When children are inevitably marked by their culture, they are similar to others from their group and different from peers of another cultural group. A minority of participants argued that they did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker or a Moroccan peer because of unfamiliarity and their own attitudes. They stated that they did not know them, were not interested in contacts, did not want to be friends with them, or simply said that they did not like or even disliked 'foreigners', 'coloreds', Moroccans, or asylum seekers. Because friendship rejection was found predominantly among the early adolescents in the contact schools, no school comparison for the reasons provided could be made.

### *3.5. Conditional friendships*

The early adolescents who indicated that perhaps they would want to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer gave two conditional reasons (see Table 3). Most of these participants (from both situations and in relation to both target groups) argued that it depended on whether the peer was, for example, (un)friendly, (not) nice, and (not) fun to play with. A few early adolescents argued that it depended on more practical conditions, such as language ability and residence.

In both types of explanation, asylum seeker and Moroccan peers were not simply seen as category members but were, rather, differentiated as individuals. The same criteria for friendship were referred to as those used by the participants who rejected out-group peers, such as being nice, friendly and able to speak Dutch. However, these criteria were not considered to be group-based qualities but rather as individual characteristics. Some asylum seekers are nice and others are not, and some asylum seekers speak Dutch and others do not. Hence, the explanations of these participants emphasized within-group differences and friendship choices were described as being dependent on individual qualities.

### *3.6. Reasons for peer acceptance*

The early adolescents who explained why they did want to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer, gave three main reasons (see Table 3). Most of these participants referred to positive characteristics, such as a Moroccan peer being friendly, funny, and nice to play with. Here the emphasis was, again, on individual differences within the categories. The fact that there are nice and friendly asylum seeker and Moroccan peers was presented as a sufficient reason for wanting to be friends with them.

Moral arguments also were used to explain why one wanted to be friends with asylum seeker and Moroccan peers. One kind of moral argument, used only in relation to asylum seekers, referred to empathizing with or responding emotionally to the situation of others. It was argued that asylum seekers are often sad, anxious and lonely because they had to flee their country and leave their friends behind ('A refugee can really use my friendship'; 'It is very sad and so, and then you want to be friends with them'). Another kind of moral argument appealed to issues of equality and similarity. In these accounts it was explained that it is unfair and discriminatory to not want to be friends with someone because of his or her group membership ('Yes, because it's not fair to exclude or judge them because of their religion and origin'). Additionally, it was argued that there are no real differences between groups and that 'we are all just humans' and that 'they are normal children or people, just like us'.

Self-interest was another common explanation for wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker or a Moroccan peer. It was explained that such friendships were liked because it allowed one to learn about other cultures and religions. Furthermore, such a friendship might be useful, and it would mean that one would have more friends.

An examination of possible situational differences (contact versus no-contact) did not show any reliable differences in the explanations given for wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker or a Moroccan peer.

### 3.7. *Discussing asylum seekers: Two examples*

In many situations, early adolescents do not simply accept or reject out-group friendship; instead they argue about it among each other. Here, we use two extracts from our focus-group discussions to illustrate the ways in which various discursive devices can be used to present a description and evaluation as reality- or empirically-based rather than as related to one's personal, biased, views and opinions.

The first extract is from a discussion on asylum seekers in the contact situation. David and Suzan had been arguing that they like asylum seekers who they presented as pitiful and in need of help. Then Jeroen continues.

- 1 Jeroen: 'I *don't* like them at all, *not at all*, cos they are
- 2 criminals, they steal and so on'
- 3 David: 'No that's not true'
- 4 Jeroen: '*Yes it is*, I have seen it myself, in Super de Boer
- 5 [a shop], last week. They were just taking things. I was with
- 6 Jan and Mark, they also saw it. And the shopkeeper said that
- 7 they always try to do that. And one day they stole my sister's
- 8 bike and my father went over to the asylum center and he
- 9 got it back'
- 10 David: 'Erm, well, yeah, I, erm, I don't know'

In line 1, the evaluation of dislike is not only emphasized but also made understandable and reasonable by characterizing asylum seekers as criminals. Challenged by David in line 3, Jeroen goes on to present his characterization of asylum seekers as being an accurate one and his evaluation as logical. Within a discursive approach it is possible to examine how exactly Jeroen makes his characterization factual, as something that is reality-based rather than a matter of personal opinion that can be heard as prejudiced. In the extract, several discursive devices can be identified (see [Edwards & Potter, 1992](#); [Verkuyten, 2001](#)).

First, Jeroen gives a detailed description of a concrete example. His narrative suggests a careful observation of the events, with all kind of details about, time ('last week'), place ('Super de Boer'), quoted speech ('what the shopkeeper said'), and actual behavior. The details make a specific claim literal, solid and factual, and present it as something that really exists independent of his own concerns and views.

Jeroen then makes the characterization factual by presenting himself and others as actual witnesses. Arguing that one was there and actually experienced or saw what happened makes a description more factual, like a recording of reality. It suggests that one was present as a witness that recorded reality as it actually is, and utterances such as 'they saw it' help to depict the event as something simply perceived, rather than as something interpreted or judged.



Accounts of consensus can be used to underpin the factual basis of a description. The event was not only noted by Jeroen but was also independently witnessed by his two friends. Arguing that different people have seen the same thing or have had the same experiences establishes objectivity. Furthermore, the shopkeeper is introduced as another witness, one who is entitled to judge because of his expert knowledge about the daily events in the shop. In addition, his use of terms such as ‘they’ and ‘always’ help to generalize the claim and to counter the potentially undermining interjection that this was a one-off incident, or isolated example.

These discursive devices help to present Jeroen’s characterization of asylum seekers as an objective reflection of reality rather than as a personal opinion, and his feeling of dislike as a rational or logical reaction as opposed to a prejudicial one. The effect of all this can be seen in David’s hesitant response in the last line. The ‘factual’ characterization of asylum seekers as criminals followed by the logical reaction of dislike is difficult to challenge.

However as the next extract shows, these and other discursive devices can also be used for challenging or undermining negative out-group characterizations. Margot has said that she does not like to play with asylum seekers’ children and then she explains why. Subsequently, she is challenged by Esther.

1. Margot: ‘Because they always try to fight. Because mostly they are nuts and they
2. usually are aggressive, and they act arrogant towards other people’
3. Esther: ‘I *always* play with them. They are nice. They know other things and they
4. are not at all nuts or aggressive once you know them’
5. Margot: ‘Well, I think they are’
6. Esther: ‘Yeah, but it is not true. They actually are very nice and funny. At first I
7. also thought that they were a bit strange and scary but now I know them’
8. Margot: ‘But, I don’t like them’.

In explaining herself, Margot makes several claims about the nature of asylum seekers’ children. Her characterization seems to make her unwillingness to play with them understandable and logical: who likes to play with children that are not nice? However, in line 5 her claim about the factual nature of these children has become something that she thinks to be the case and in line 8 an internal reason (‘don’t like them’) is offered for not wanting to play with them. Hence, in her account there is a gradual shift from world or reality to mind or psychology. This shift occurs in response to Esther who constructs the alternative reality of asylum seekers’ children as being nice and interesting. Esther presents herself in lines 3 to 4 as having intimate knowledge, and therefore as being someone who is entitled to judge. Furthermore, she makes a distinction between initial expectations and reality (Edwards & Potter, 1992). ‘Once’ (line 4) you know them you know that they are not at all nuts or aggressive. And in lines 6 to 7 the words ‘At first I also thought’ present her claim about these children as not being the result of some prior expectation, but of the facts themselves. The implication is that the facts are so strong that they can prove initial and understandable (‘I *also*’) expectations wrong. In addition, Esther uses modalizing terms such as ‘always’, ‘not at all’, and ‘very’ to make her claim acceptable and factual (Pomerantz, 1986).

#### 4. Discussion

General developments in the structural complexity of children’s thinking and social knowledge do not directly pertain to the particular ideas and beliefs that children will acquire. Such ideas and beliefs

depend on what is available in children's social environments (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Emler & Ohana, 1993). Social representation theory argues that understandings and moral judgments depend on socially shared beliefs that are being created and recreated through interaction and communication within particular situations.

The present study examined early adolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships, and explored possible situational differences related to this. The findings suggest that, compared to Moroccan and Dutch peers, asylum seeker peers are understood and evaluated differently. For example, in describing prototypical group members, there were no differences in the categories used to describe a Moroccan and a Dutch peer. In contrast, when describing a typical asylum seeker most of the references made were about living conditions. As indicated earlier, the category of asylum seekers is ethnically and culturally very heterogeneous and references that were made to culture and language simply indicated that they have a different culture or language without being specific. Preadolescents' knowledge about asylum seekers seems to be expressed mainly as a narrative about people that had to flee the country of origin; live in an asylum seekers' center; and do not know whether they will get a resident permit, which would allow them to stay in the country. However, there was a clear difference between the responses given by the groups in each of the two local situations. The preadolescents living close to an asylum seekers' center made fewer references to living conditions and more to physical features than did the other group of participants. For the contact group, asylum seekers are more concrete or visible on an everyday basis than for the no-contact group.

Asylum seekers were also described more negatively and rejected more strongly as a friend than Moroccans who are one of the least accepted 'established' ethnic minority group in the Netherlands (Hagendoorn, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). These negative evaluations were much higher in the contact situation than in the no-contact situation. In fact, almost three out of four children did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker in the contact situation. This result is probably due to the fact that the participants living near this particular asylum seekers' center share a social environment in which negative stories, experiences and beliefs about asylum seekers are more frequently heard. Preadolescents living in this social environment may base their understanding and evaluation of differences and potential relationships on these social representations. Additionally, friendship with a Moroccan peer was also rejected by half of the participants in the contact situation and there was a significant association between the responses towards peers of the two target groups. This suggests that there are not only socially shared negative ideas and beliefs about asylum seekers, but also about out-group peers more generally. In contrast, in the no-contact situation the rejection of asylum seekers and Moroccans as friends was relatively low. About half of these preadolescents indicated that they did want to be friends with an asylum seeker or Moroccan peer, and one third wanted this conditionally.

Hence, there were clear differences between the two situations showing the importance of context for understanding early adolescents intergroup perceptions and attitudes (see Verkuyten, 2004a). However, it is premature to draw more general conclusions about the role of contact with asylum seekers on the basis of research comparing only two situations. Apart from the level and nature of contact, there are always many other characteristics that may explain the differences found. For example, it is possible that the school in the no-contact situation pays more attention to multicultural education than the other two schools or that the participants in the two situations differ in socioeconomic background. Thus, the present results should be treated as suggestive for relevant situational differences. Future studies should examine a whole array of situations and, in doing so, individual and contextual characteristics should be taken into account simultaneously (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000;

Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). This will allow us to examine which situational characteristics are important as well as the pathways through which situations might influence preadolescents' evaluations and relationships.

Different studies have examined children's reasoning about social exclusion and peer group rejection (see Killen et al., 2004, for a review). In the present study, the participants were asked to explain why they did or did not want to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer. Stating that one does not want to be friends with ethnic out-group peers often requires an acceptable explanation. The preadolescents rejecting friendship gave three main explanations. A minority of the participants referred to unfamiliarity and the own negative attitude. They argued that they did not want to be friends because they did not know these peers or disliked them. These preadolescents might not be concerned with the moral implications of friendship rejection. However, their answers could also be made part of a morally more acceptable account. For example, the principle-practice distinction could be used for arguing that in principle one would like to be friends with out-group peers but not in practice because of unfamiliarity. Additionally, it could be argued that every child is free to choose his or her friends and does not have to be friends with peers that one – for whatever reason – doesn't like (Nucci, 2001; Verkuyten et al., 1997).

The majority of participants rejecting friendship gave two other kinds of explanation. Both of these tend to function to make the negative response understandable and acceptable. First, characterizations and evaluations can be presented as reality based or as features of the world rather than the result of one's own perceptions, attitudes and desires. Evaluations can be presented as reasonable by defining the out-group characterizations in a factual way. Participants who rejected friendships explained that asylum seekers and/or Moroccans actually are aggressive, unfriendly, dishonest and so on. These characteristics were presented as factual features and thereby provide an account for the friendship rejection. It is understandable rather than irrational or unreasonable to reject out-group peers as friends when they are actually aggressive and dishonest.

The second and related way in which the rejection of out-group friends was made understandable was by reference to culture. There can be real cultural differences, making it less likely for cross-ethnic friendships to develop. For example, the cultural meanings of friendship and the norms and values guiding friendship behavior may differ (e.g. Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Izuka & Contarello, 1986). Additionally, there can be religious differences as well as differences in tradition and language. Friendships are difficult when children born into a cultural community are seen as inevitably absorbing and internalizing the customary ways of speaking, thinking and feeling of the group in question. Hence, references to cultural differences and enculturation can be used to give an acceptable and understandable explanation for friendship rejection. An emphasis on cultural and language differences turns questions of friendship choices into more practical issues rather than moral ones. Practical considerations were also put forward by those participants that gave a conditional response to the friendship question. These participants argued that they did not want to be friends when, for example, these peers live too far away or might leave the neighborhood any time.

Culture, however, is a discourse with mixed potential that can be applied differently in explanations and accounts. Some of the participants indicating that they did like to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer also referred to cultural differences. They argued that such friendships would allow them to learn about other cultures and religions. In addition, two other self-interest reasons were given for wanting to be friends with these out-group peers. Most of these explanations emphasized positive individual differences within the two categories. It was argued that there are nice and friendly asylum seeker and Moroccan peers and that friendship choices should be based on these kinds of personal

qualities. This same reasoning was used by participants who said that friendship was conditional and dependent on positive personal qualities. In these explanations and in contrast to those rejecting friendship, asylum seeker and Moroccan peers were not simply seen as category members but were instead differentiated as individuals. Criteria such as being nice and friendly were not considered as group-based qualities of peers but rather as individual characteristics. Some asylum seekers are nice and others not and it was argued that friendship choices depend on this.

In addition, some participants who answered affirmatively to the question whether they would like to be friends gave moral reasons for this. In relation to asylum seekers, references to empathetic and emotional responsiveness were made. It was explained that one wanted to be friends with asylum seekers because after having fled their country they are often sad, anxious and lonely. This is the moral perspective that emphasizes the virtue of compassion and care for others, or what Gibbs (2003) terms ‘the good’. The other moral argument used to explain the willingness to be friends with both asylum seekers and Moroccans emphasized issues of equality and similarity. Participants explained that it is wrong to reject peers on the basis of their group membership and that children are all alike. This moral perspective emphasizes justice or ‘the right’ (Gibbs, 2003).

Group-based peer exclusion or friendship rejection is a morally sensitive issue and our results show that preadolescents can deal with the moral implications in different ways. References to psychological (‘actually being’) and cultural reality, as well as to practical circumstances help make the rejection of out-group friendships understandable and acceptable. Grounding an interpretation in reality makes it independent of one’s personal perspective, wishes or concerns and thereby morally less problematic. However, such interpretations are not self-evident but rather negotiated in interactions. Social representation theory emphasizes the central role of communication processes. This means that for understanding group distinctions in children’s lives it is important to examine not only how individual children respond to hypothetical situations and reason individually about group-based exclusion. It is also important to examine how group characterizations and understandings are actually discussed and fabricated in interaction. The active ways in which children in peer interactions define and construct reality and struggle with alternative interpretations and moral issues should be studied. The level of (verbal) interaction is important *in itself* and what children in interactions say can be treated as social practices with their own features and consequences (e.g., Edwards & Stokoe, 2004; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004).

The two focus-group examples show that early adolescents argue about reality and use ‘reality’ to justify their own descriptions and evaluations and to criticize those of others. A group characterization or assessment can always be challenged as being morally wrong or as reflecting psychological preoccupations or prejudicial concerns rather than being based in reality. Hence, as shown in the first extract from the focus-group study, in giving a negative group characterization, early adolescents orient to and try to manage this possible interpretation. In addition, as shown in the second extract, this interpretation can also be introduced for undermining such a characterization. However, whether a challenge is successful depends on the way it is presented or the discursive devices used. Devices such as detailed descriptions; the introduction and quoting of others as independent and corroborating witnesses; formulations suggesting generality; the use of modalizing terms; and disconfirmed expectations all served to ground conclusions in reality. And, as the second extract shows, devices that establish objectivity and reality can also be used to challenge or undermine particular group claims. Hence, the same devices can function in different ways in different contexts.

With this research we have tried to examine preadolescents' understandings and reactions towards asylum seeker peers and to improve our knowledge about how children reason about group-based friendships. As with all research, there are limitations to our study and there are a host of additional questions that need to be addressed. For example, we did not examine age related differences in understandings, evaluations and the use of discursive devices. In addition, we examined only two situations and only an ethnically Dutch sample of participants. It is important for future research to examine understandings and attitudes towards asylum seekers among different age groups, in a range of situations, and among children of 'established' ethnic minority groups. Additionally, we did not include, for example, measures of cognitive and moral development, which may be important for understandings children's reactions and responses.

Nonetheless, we think that this study represents a first step in analyzing preadolescents understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers, and a useful addition to the existing work on group-based friendships. Continued research is likely to be necessary for creating social and educational policies for teaching children about asylum seekers and for designing intervention strategies to prevent and correct negative perceptions and exclusionary practices. In doing so, it seems important to examine not only mental processes, abilities, and capacities. The particular understandings children will acquire depend on what is available and common in children's social environments. Furthermore, children are active participants in the situational and interactive construction of distinctions and understandings (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Hence, it is important also to examine children's accounts and how they themselves and in interaction with each other define choices and behaviors as acceptable and understandable or, rather, as questionable and morally wrong. This allows researchers to be close to the actual lives that children live and thereby to provide relevant and adequate suggestions for improving group relations in schools, neighborhoods and other settings. Paying attention to the ways that children collectively and interactively understand and negotiate about minority groups can provide useful clues for practical initiatives. It can give educators and professionals a better grasp of the sort of information that children base their understandings upon, and of what counts as acceptable or objectionable from the children's perspective. It also allows us to examine distinctions made between categories of minorities and how, for example, asylum seeker peers are distinguished from 'established' ethnic and racial minority groups. Real-life situations often consist of a series of minority groups in which ethnicity or related characteristics such as race, language, culture or religion are criteria for group distinctions and group status. Most theoretical discussion and empirical investigations tend to ignore these complex situations and focus on dyadic group relations and more general cognitive and motivational processes. Research on these processes is important and has led to various applied initiatives (see Vogt, 1997). However, for developing even more effective interventions it is also important to have a good understanding of the particular ideas and beliefs that children acquire and of the discursive methods that they use to justify or criticize negative evaluations and exclusionary behaviors.

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